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## Adult distance learners in distance education : a literature review

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## Adult distance learners in distance education : a literature review

### Abstract

Distance education is a current reality creating new opportunities and challenges for educational institutions, offering students expanded choices in where, when, how and from whom they learn, and making education accessible to a large population, especially for adult learners. This paper intends to present and discuss some of the most current research on the issues which influence adult distance learners' learning process. And help the school administrators, distance course designers and distance instructors to truly understand adult distance learners and their learning needs; design an effective and efficient learning environment and experience; facilitate adult learners' learning, provide learners' support to enhance adult learners' success in the higher distance education. These issues include analyzing adult learners' characteristics.

Two kinds of adult distance learners' characteristics are presented within this paper. They are demographic and situational characteristics, such as age, gender, cultural background, disability, location, and life roles, and affective characteristics, such as personality type, learning styles, and motivation. Some concerns about issues that impact on supporting adult distance learners' learning process and how to support adult distance learning are discussed. These issues include understanding adult learners and their learning needs, such as their knowledge, prior skills, experience, culture, context, learning patterns and styles. Strategies of supporting learning from the aspects of course planning and instruction, technology support and interaction and feedback are also presented in this paper. Additionally, this paper also addresses adult distance learner's responsibility as an important essence in their distance learning process.

# Adult Distance Learners in Distance Education: A Literature Review

A Research Paper

Submitted to the

Division of Educational Technology

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

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## ABSTRACT

Distance education is a current reality creating new opportunities and challenges for educational institutions, offering students expanded choices in where, when, how and from whom they learn, and making education accessible to a large population, especially for adult learners. This paper intends to present and discuss some of the most current research on the issues which influence adult distance learners' learning process. And help the school administrators, distance course designers and distance instructors to truly understand adult distance learners and their learning needs; design an effective and efficient learning environment and experience; facilitate adult learners' learning, provide learners' support to enhance adult learners' success in the higher distance education. These issues include analyzing adult learners' characteristics. Two kinds of adult distance learners' characteristics are presented within this paper. They are demographic and situational characteristics, such as age, gender, cultural background, disability, location, and life roles, and affective characteristics, such as personality type, learning styles, and motivation. Some concerns about issues that impact on supporting adult distance learners' learning process and how to support adult distance learning are discussed. These issues include understanding adult learners and their learning needs, such as their knowledge, prior skills, experience, culture, context, learning patterns and styles. Strategies of supporting

learning from the aspects of course planning and instruction, technology support and interaction and feedback are also presented in this paper. Additionally, this paper also addressed adult distance learner's responsibility as an important essence in their distance learning process.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the prevalence of distance education in higher education, the learners in distance education programs have increased in numbers and in diversity over recent years, especially the adult distance learners. To find what are the factors that influenced the distance learners' success in the distance education becomes the crucial task for the researchers.

Cyrs (1997) states that many academic administrators thought distance education was their field of dreams. Set up the teleclassrooms, design the distance courses and purchase the latest technology, then the students will come. Yes, the students will come, but one problem was confounding. Providing access to the knowledge is not the same as to confirm the learners had a successful learning experience. Confronted with the problem, administrators and the course designers need to truly understand the adult distance learner and design the effective learning environments to facilitate their learning.

This paper is intended as a general review of the literature from 1980s to the present to introduce the distance learners' characteristics, identify their needs, the factors that enhanced their success in the distance education, issues of learners responsibility, and the approaches to support their study. Through this review, it will be possible to identify the problems related to the learners' success in the education at a distance and find possible ways to enhance the opportunities for

distance learners to achieve the successful outcomes in the distance learning environment.

This paper consists of four chapters. The first chapter is the introduction which addresses the problems which the paper will discuss. The second chapter introduces the methods and procedures to identify and locate the sources and information about the main topic of this research paper. The third chapter reviews, analyzes, and discusses the related literature for the purpose of finding out the factors that influence the adult distance learners' success in higher education at a distance and the approaches for supporting their learning. The fourth chapter synthesizes the review of the literature to form a conclusion.

## METHODOLOGY

The distance learner is one of the important topics in the area of distance education research. After the certification of the effectiveness of the distance education, more and more researchers and educators begin to turn their attention to study the distance learner, to try to find out the factors influencing their success in the distance learning environment and to identify the effective approaches to facilitate their learning.

In this research area, some experts and professional researchers have written many books and articles to present and discuss the adult learners' role in distance education. In order to identify and locate the related information from a numerous resources to support this paper's ideas, some research methods were used. Content analysis was employed as the main research method. Content analysis is a very effective research approach to analyze the various types of documents, such as the official, semiofficial, and unofficial articles (Birley & Moreland, 1998). The texts that have been viewed and analyzed for purposes of this research paper include books, journal articles, on-line articles, and ERIC Documents. ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) is a federally funded information system that provides access to education related information. It can offer Internet-based resources, answers to individual queries, and archives research papers and articles. Identifying and analyzing the resources and using the criteria for evaluating the information are the very important steps for the whole

research process. Three rationales for selecting the sources and exploring the research areas are: (1) Does the article relate to the paper's discussion area? (2) Can the authors' opinions be used to support this paper's main ideas? (3) Can the articles or books provide useful information to facilitate this paper to express its main discuss?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Adult Learners' Characteristics

When several decades of research provided significant and overwhelming evidence of distance education's effectiveness as a delivery method (Thompson, 1998), educators begin to emphasize their research on distance learners, and their characteristics, particularly in relation to their achievement in distance programs. The distance learner is the crucial and essential member of the distance instructional system (Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M. & Zvacek, S., 2003), and the adult learners are the premier distance learners. They are the mainstream of the prospective students in the distance programs.

Understanding basic information about adult distance learners' characteristics is very important for instructors in any instructional situation. Simonson et al. (2003) stated that each member of a distance class is an individual, although each individual may belong to one of the subgroups of their class. Each individual is unique and needs to be recognized for those unique characteristics. Taking the time to learn and understand the individual, to find the factors which influenced the adult distance learners' success will be beneficial to distance instructors to enhance their adult learners' experience and to facilitate these adults success in the distance learning program.

### Demographic and Situational Characteristics

As Holmberg (1995) states there is no obvious evidence to indicate that distance students should be regarded as a homogeneous group. However, many distance students do share broad demographic and situational similarities. Peters (2001) addressed that compared with the students who attending a campus-based university, the adult learners in the distance education have their own typical and common characteristics in the age, gender, cultural background, disability, location, and life roles.

#### Age

Although the methods of reporting students' ages vary from study to study, researchers agree that distance education students are usually older than typical undergraduate students (Schwitzer, A. M., Ancis, J. R. & Brown N., 2001). The adults who take part in distance education are a special group, they differ from students in traditional universities because they are usually "older" adults (Peters, 2001). Schwitzer et al. (2001) stated that in distance education, adult learners are the majority student. They range in age between 20-50, some of them are even older than that. Holmberg (1995) points out that "25-35 age group seems to be the largest in most organizations" (p. 12).

Some researchers attempt to measure the relationship of distance learners' age and their success in the distance education program. Souder (1994) reports that there is a positive correlation between success and students' age. He explains

the higher levels of success for older students on the basis of the increased maturity, self-discipline, life experience, and financial responsibility for their education. Additionally, most of the adult students have higher levels of education at the time when they enroll in the distance education. This has been regarded as a factor correlated with the learners' success in the study (Dille and Mezack, 1991).

### Gender

Most studies of distance learners in North American higher education report that more women than men are enrolled in courses delivered at a distance learning environment (Thompson, 1998). Distance education is a very effective teaching and learning system to provide women the opportunities to enrich their lives and develop their earning power. A report from Normand (1995) illustrates that 60%-70% of the estimated 400,000 distance learners in Canada are female. Kirkup and von Prummer (1997) state that, in the period from 1990 to 1992, women account for 50.0% of the undergraduate students in the British Open University, 54.7% in the Spanish distance teaching university, 38.0% in the Netherlands, and 31.0% in the German universities. Schwitzer et al. (2001) pointed out that about two-thirds in today's distance students are female. Burge (1998) stated that female distance learners are the main prospective students as well as providers of the economic benefits in distance education. Simonson et al (2003) offer that women felt gaining a university credential was critical and the impact of failing serious.

Ross and Powell (1990) studied the relationship between gender and success in distance education. They collected data from the 1987-88 school year at Athabasca University, in Alberta, Canada. They pointed out that a greater percentage of women passed distance education courses. They also stated that “this higher completion trend was visible irrespective of the students’ general study area, specific course selection, course level, mode of course delivery, students’ program status, or the number of course students had previously taken” (p. 10). They concluded four points to give people a brief description about the reasons for female distance learners’ higher success rates. 1) Most of the women are working only part time outside the home. 2) The higher rates of women have tried to access institutional learning support services. 3) The potentially higher level of motivation that might operate among women, who more often work in occupational sectors in which career advancement is closely tied to academic upgrading. 4) The appeal of distance format to woman who must integrate education into live characterized by multiple roles. Although those data are collected and studied almost ten year ago, it provided a guideline and reference for today’s distance educators to design and deliver an effective distance program and meet their students’ needs.

### Cultural Background

As the advanced technologies become more user feasible and cheaper in cost, and as the idea of drawing on foreign educational services without leaving



home becomes more widely accepted, more and more adult distance learners with wide diverse cultural backgrounds enrolled in the distance education (Thompson, 1998). Understanding the adult distance learner from a different cultural background and finding the influence of culture on their learning is crucial for the distance educators to design the effective distance course and enhance the success of the distance learners' outcomes.

Distance educators should understand the way that individuals learn, including knowing the students' culture and its effect upon learning. Anderson (1988) states:

All components of a culture are built upon some basic conceptual system or philosophical worldview, and the various cultural systems tend to include the same general themes (life, death, birth, mortality, human nature, religion, etc.). Even though these beliefs appear across cultures, they can be viewed different within each culture. (p. 3)

Anderson notes that those differences must be taken into consideration in the distance educational setting. He also states that, "a different set of understanding about the way diverse populations communicate, behave, and think needs to be developed by the distance educators" (p. 8). However, each individual, within a family, classroom, or who comes from a group with a same culture background, has his or her typical and unique learning style, which will differ significantly from those of his or her classmates, parents, and members in his or her cultural

group (Torff & Sternberg, 1998). So for distance educator, each student should be viewed as an individual. Their learning needs should be take into consideration during the distance teaching and learning process.

Bonk and Kim (1998) found that matching teaching to adult distance learner's cultural background and learning style may get higher achievement in distance education. However, owing that the United States has been home to many people with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, there is a need to provide opportunities and activities to challenge the learner to learn in new or less preferred ways. It is a good experience for the learners to get information and knowledge about other cultures and learning within different learning environments.

The challenge for the distance educators is to recognize the diversity of culture and learning styles and then to begin to design an appropriate distance learning environment to enhance diverse distance learners' success in distance learning. Advanced instructional technologies, providing a wide variety of instructional activities and resources, give each adult distance learner an opportunity to access a way in which he or she prefers to learn. Also it is a challenge to the learners to expand their personal learning style to make each learner become more able to function in the diverse world (Sanchez and Gunawardena, 1998).

## Disability

Thompson (1998) points out that it is difficult to get the statistics on students with disabilities in the U.S. because the federal law requests students to identify themselves as disabled on application forms. Recent research reported that approximately 3% of American students enrolled in the University of Wisconsin-Extension Independent Study program have either visual, auditory, physical, or learning disabilities. The percentage will increase steadily as more and more students realized the program's services and the effects of the Americans with Disabilities Act spread (Paist, 1995). Distance education provides greater flexibility to meet the needs to students with disabilities (Mehrotra C. M., Hollister, C. D. & McGahey, L., 2001). Thompson (1998) also reported that approximately 5,000 of the undergraduates at Open University of the United Kingdom have disabilities. This number is increasing at the rate of about 10% per year. The integration of information technologies into the distance programs makes the convenience of home study become feasible. Thus, disabled students have more opportunities to continue their education.

The integration of the appropriate, accessible, and effective distance education technology provides an effective learning environment for the disabled students. In relation to the application of information technology to the needs of disabled learners, there is considerable evidence of learning success for this student population (Hawkrige and Vincent, 1993).

### Location

The characteristics of distance education, such as the geographic separation between teacher and students, traditionally, are the main reason to attract the distance learners who can not enroll in traditional on-campus classes. Accompanied with the development of the advanced instructional technologies, international distance learning becomes possible for the distance learner who may be located in a different country across the world.

Gibson and Graff (1992) find that 77% of the distance learners lived over fifty-one miles from campus, some of them lived between 101 and 200 miles from campus. Data on extended campus enrollments in Colorado demonstrate this phenomenon with the report that the rate of the residents who are living in the rural places enrolled in distance study are higher than the people who live in the urban cities (Statewide Extended Campus, 1996).

However, the prospective and enrolled learners in distance education are not only limited to the learners who are located in places far from the campus. Recent studies also point out a phenomenon in the distance education environment that more and more students, in close geographical proximity to traditional educational institutions, are choosing distance learning. It is not because distance education is the only alternative, but because it is the preferred alternative for the learner (Robinson, 1992).

### Life Roles

For adult distance learners, in addition to engaging in study as students, most of them also assume responsibility with the roles of workers and spouses. A number of studies illustrate the extension of this trend in the distance education. Thompson (1998) found that 57% of the students worked 40 or more hours each week outside the home. Robinson (1992) stated that among distance education students at the Open College, 83.7% were employed outside the home (62.2% full time) and 58.5% were married. Over 90% of the students in the Gibson and Graff's (1992) study were employed (75.8% full time) and about 75% were married. These numbers not only identified the typical characteristics of adult distance learners, their differences compared with the traditional on-campus students, but also the study reflects the adult distance learners' special needs for the format of distance education. Convenience and flexibility offered by the distance educational program, frees the student of the constraints of place and time to provide opportunity for the adult distance learners to attempt to jump between their multiple life roles and responsibilities.

From the study of the adult distance learners' demographic and situational characteristics, basic information which is described as the widely accepted view of the adult distance learner is listed: 1) Most adult distance learners are older than the typical undergraduate students in the traditional education. 2) Most of them are female. 3) Most of them are work full time in addition to their distance

study. 4) Most of them have multiple life-roles. In order to design an effective learning environment, it is vital and necessary for distance educators to understand their learners' demographic and situational characteristics.

### Affective Characteristics

As Olgren (1998) states, if learning is the goal of education, then knowledge about how the learners learn should be the central component in course design. Removing the barriers that enhance learning and promoting the quality of learners' learning outcomes begins with the question of what and how are people learning and what factors affect their learning. Affective characteristics of the adult distance learners are the major study subject for the researchers in 1990s (Thompson, 1998). Affective characteristics are the crucial part of the study. The research sought to identify the learners' perception of and attitude towards distance study, so as to facilitate learners' success in the distance learning setting. The findings about affective characteristics of distance learners usually include the personality type, learning styles, and motivation.

### Personality Type

The term of personality refers to the cognition, emotion, and behaviors of an individual that remain relatively stable across time and situations (Biner, Bink, Huffman, and Dean, 1995). Several authors have reported that the personality characteristics seem to accompany preference for and success in distance education programs (Eastmond, 1995; Willis, 1994). As the most important parts

of personality type, distance learners' locus of control, self-direction, and self-concept are being discussed below.

Learners' locus of control. The internal locus of control is the belief that consequences stem from one's own behaviors and efforts. It appears to be an attribute of many students who study in distance education, particularly for the students who are successful in distance programs. Jonassen and Grabinger (1988) illustrated that the students who were studying at a distance were more likely to have an internal locus of control rather than those who were studying on the traditional campus. Dille and Mezack (1991) report that the internal locus of control was positively related with success in distance learning courses. They state that students with a more internal locus of control were more likely to be successful and to obtain a higher grade. Students with an external locus of control "would be less likely to persevere when faced with the perceived tougher challenge of a telecourse" (p. 29). Locus of control is the significant factor to student's academic success. Abstract learners with internal locus of control (Dille and Mezack, 1991) and skills in learning alone (Fjortoft, 1995) were more successful.

Self-direction. According to Thompson (1998), the learners' characteristic of self-direction is considered the effective personal characteristic for the distance learners who are separated from their instructors and classmates. Adult distance learners will benefit from this attribute for their success in study. During the

study, distance learners will exercise full control of their learning process. They generally decide to take a course, usually on a voluntary basis, and also according to the constraints of their life situation, deciding when and where to study. However, there are some researchers who argue with this idea.

Thompson (1998) reports that the results of studies of the distance learners' orientation toward self-directed learning and self-management are mixed. Some of the studies suggest that a positive relationship between self-directedness and achievement and others report that there are no significant relationships between the ability to manage one's own learning and academic success. Robinson (1992) even found that distance learners were not interested in self-directed learning. The distance learners wanted to get the specific directions from their instructors on how to do the assignments.

Self-concept. Gibson and Graff (1992) state that self-concept refers to an adult's perception of his or her ability to succeed in the educational environment. The adult learners' self-concept changes with time and experience. It plays an important role in influencing adult distance learners' persistence in distance education. Adult distance learners who have the perception of confidence on their abilities to successfully engage in the distance learning will enhance the potential for their success.



### Learning Style

James and Gardner (cited in James & Blank, 1995) defined that learning style as the “complex manner in which, and conditions under which, learners most efficiently and most effectively perceive, process, store, and recall what they are attempting to learn”(p. 21). Gibson and Graff (1992) indicated that successful students in distance education exhibited lower levels of peer affiliation and higher levels of confidence in their performance and competence. Non-completers exhibited higher peer affiliation and less confidence in their knowledge, skills, and ability to reach their goal of degree completion. The studies were conducted by using the Canfield Learning Style Inventory (CLSI) to measure the differences between the successful and unsuccessful distance learners related to learning style preferences and perception of barriers to persistence and success. The results suggest that successful students have less need to relate to others in the educational environment. They also have less concrete learning style which is better suited to distance education. They are more introverted learners that prefer reading, internal processing and working alone.

### Motivation

Motivation is always a key issue in the field of education (Fox, 1998). Intrinsic motivation is critical to deep learning for the distance learner, because the learners are more willing to put forth the mental effort to really learn the knowledge (Olgren, 1998). Simonson et al. (2003) states that, “in the majority of

students, distance learners were found to be highly motivated” (p.167). Studying the barriers which prevent the students from taking part in the traditional class is the best way to understand the motivation for the students studying at the distance (Hezel and Dirr, 1991).

A report about the motivation of the adult distance learner found that for some students distance learning represents not only an acceptable replacement for the traditional education, but also a desirable alternative for their lifelong education. The reasons for leading the learner to choose distance learning options are varied from negative past experiences with traditional education, preference for independent study, or attraction to an advanced distance learning environment (Willis, 1994).

Motivation plays a very important role in affecting the adult distance learners’ success in the distance learning. Adult students’ motivation is more likely to be intrinsic when they have some responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. Adult learners learn better when the learning activities are related with their needs of the knowledge, which they are eager to learn.

Intrinsically motivated adult learners and those with high expectations for grades and completion of a degree will have the high rates of success in their learning (Fjortoft, 1995; Laube, 1992; Ross & Powell, 1990).

### Supporting Adult Distance Learners

The definition of learner support varied differently. One describes it as the

elements of an open learning system capable of responding to a particular individual learner (Thorpe, 1988, p. 54). Another stresses the learner support as support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system and assignment making (Hui, 1989, p.131) And the third (Evans, 1994) defined learner support as the requisite student services essential to insure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance. Evans has provided a most interesting description of the learner support:

The learner support is to develop and maintain approaches which enable students to have their voices heard and for the open and distance educators and their institutions to be able to listen and understand the practical implications of what is being said. (p. 128)

Learner support is an integral part in the distance teaching and learning process. It is not just a supplement but an all pervasive component of distance education processes, which ensures the learning and teaching are approached from a learner-centered vision of education. Marketing experts tell us that every issue of the product, program, or service is a marketing activity, building customer satisfaction and loyalty to ensure repeat business or not. It is similarly as the successful student support, which is a result of every aspect of a program (Granger and Benke, 1998). From the students' first awareness of the program to their graduation day, providing the student support to maintain the distance

learners' engagement and progress to ensure their successful learning become the important responsibilities for the distance educators and faculties.

There are many issues impacting on learner support. All of them provide essential support for the distance learners to permit them to successfully plan and develop their distance learning and get positive outcomes. Knowing the learners, knowing who they are, where they are, and what is available to them, understanding their needs and limitations in regard to every aspect of the distance programs, is the crucial part for the distance educator.

#### Understanding Adult Learners

The majority of distance learners are adults. They are returning to education and usually have some expectations, such as: to get the degree or certification for qualifying for promotion, or to meet employers' regulations when they prepare to seek a new job. In many aspects, returning learners are goal-oriented for gaining the degree or certificate more than task-oriented, anticipating actual study and learning process (Granger and Benke, 1998). Distance learners usually have busy life roles and they must finish their study with their jobs, childcare, household responsibilities, etc. Beyond the above-mentioned characteristics, the learner support as well as other marketing promotion should begin with that understanding. Institutions should understand their prospective students. The following issues are some beneficial aspects for distance educators

to take into consideration when they try to design an effective distance course and facilitate the adult distance learners get their success in their learning.

### Knowledge

To understand the distance learners' actual entry levels about the subject is very important. The educators can use pretests to assess their knowledge. The British Open University offered self-assessment tests to help students determine if they need preparatory study before they take particular courses (Thompson, 1998).

### Prior skills

What are the skills required for the prospective distance learners to have? These include some skills related to the study, such as, critical reading, writing, knowledge about how to retrieval the information, even the students' learning habits.

### Experience

What experiences are the prospective students likely to bring to the distance program? Some distance learners maybe only have the significant experience in a very narrow aspect of a field, such as one distance learner only was familiar with one distance learning environment, such as the television-based Iowa Communication Network (ICN). The distance course designers need to consider this phenomenon and accommodate these different backgrounds of the distance learners when they try to design a successful distance class.

### Culture

What cultural background does the program provide and what background do the prospective students actually have? The learners' cultural background must be considered especially when the distance courses are broadcast cross regional and even national boundaries.

### Context

What context does the program expect for the distance learners and what context do they actually inhabit (Granger and Benker, 1998)?

### Goals and motivations

What does the program expect of the learners' goals and motivations and what is actually known about them? To know why someone is in the distance program and what outcomes she or he expects can provide guidelines to provide an effective support to enhance students success.

### Learning patterns and styles

What teaching and learning approaches will the program provide and what learning approach is most successful for the distance learners? Studies emphasize active learning (learner-centered teaching and learning approach) and the importance of building interactive activities into the distance programs which have been found to be more effective than the passive learning lecture-presentation of the past (Granger and Benker, 1998). Schwitzer et al (2001) stated that in the learner-centered climate of distance education, instructors must

develop classroom experiences that are effective in meeting the needs of a wide range of students.

### Understanding Adult Learners' Needs

Meeting the adult distance learners' instructional needs is the cornerstone of every effective distance education program to promote the potential of the learners' success (Willis, 1994). As the distance learners need to be satisfied during their study, in meeting this learner's satisfaction, those involved in providing and supporting the distance course should take the responsibilities to help the learners to meet their special learning needs.

Because adult distance learners' typical characteristics differ in their age, gender, geography, social class, culture and belief, income, etc., their needs in the distance learning environment will be diverse. For example, Kirkup and Von Prummer(1993) reported that many female distance learners experience the psychological, time, and economic burdens when they want simultaneously to study, hold down a job, and manage a household. For the female distance learners, they need learner support to help them to manage their time and facilitate their studies.

To function effectively, the distance learner must quickly become comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning at a distance. Effort should be made to adapt the delivery system, here are some strategies to meeting the distance learners' needs:

- 1) Make students aware of and comfortable with the new patterns of telecommunication which have been used in the course (Holmberg, 1995; Schrum, L & Benson, A, 2002).
- 2) Learn about the distance learners' backgrounds and experiences, discussing the instructors' background and interests are equally important (Willis, 1994; Schwitzer, et al, 2001).
- 3) Be sensitive to different communication styles and varied cultural backgrounds. Remember, for example, that the distance learners may have different language skills, and that humor is culturally specific and will not be perceived the same way by all (Sponder, 1990).
- 4) Assist distance learners in becoming familiar and comfortable with the course delivery technology and prepare them to resolve the technical problems that will arise. Focus on joint problem solving, not placing blame for the occasional technical difficulty (Schrum, L & Benson, A, 2002).
- 5) Be aware of distance learners' needs in meeting standard university deadlines, despite the lag time often involved in rural mail delivery (Willis, 1994).



### How to Support Adult Distance Learning

It is vital for distance educators to provide supports from the aspects of course planning and instruction, technology support, and interaction and feedback for their learners.

#### Course Planning and Instruction

Egan and Gibb (1997) stress distance instructors should provide detailed, precise syllabi and interactive study guides. These syllabi and study guides need to be structured to move students from passive reception to active learning and engagement during the distance course. Usually syllabi for distance courses are broad in scope and more specific in content than those prepared for conventional courses. Every course must have clear instructions. The worst situation for a distance learner is to have wasted time to work and not understand what is the expectation from the instructor. The instructional materials should be constructed in the similar packages or formats, helping the learners to learn how to approach their study.

#### Technology Support

Technology support and process facilitation are very important in supporting distance learners' learning. They should provide administrative direction, emphatic listening, moral support, and conflict resolution services. For example, many distance learners still are not comfortable with computer

technology and they will require some type of support to build their confidence about the technology (Willis, 1994).

Hardy and Boaz (1997) mentioned that many distance programs train faculty for distance teaching, students in distance education are rarely given such an opportunity. They simply meet each other on the first day of the distance class, receive a technical overview and a few handouts, and begin the class. Sometimes, technical problems will make students feel frustrated, they will lose their patience and confidence to continue their study. So from here, we find that improving the technical support to the distance learner can stimulate their learning motivation. Some support services such as library access, Internet accounts, and advising should be offered to the learners, too.

### Interaction and Feedback

Using effective interaction and feedback will enable the instructor to identify and meet individual distance learner's needs and foster their learning. Feedback is essential for students to create meaning from that which they have learned.

Hardy and Boaz (1997) studied class interaction and stressed that it is very critical to the success of a learner in both face-to-face instruction and distance learning. The distance class should integrate a variety of delivery systems for interaction and feedback, such as one-on-one and conference calls, fax, electronic mail, video, and computer conference. Interaction should exist between the

learner-teacher, learner-content, and learner-learner. The instructors should contact each student every week if possible, especially early in the course. Make detailed comments on written assignments, and provide additional information to support students' study. The returning of the assignment should not be delayed. If possible, set up telephone office hours using a toll-free number. In the early stage of the course, the instructors should engage the students to interact each other, such as use the email to introduce each other. It is like an icebreaker to let the students become familiar with each other and will effectively improve distance learners' interaction.

Distance instructors should realize that they have the responsibilities to assist learners in effectively using the resources provided through the learning support system. This learner support system is very important in fostering the distance learners' success in their learning.

#### Adult Distance Learners' Responsibility

In distance education, adult distance learners' responsibility is not like the original customers who just paid the money to get the production, the knowledge. They can not just simply purchase their higher education. Adult distance learners need to realize their responsibilities in the distance learning process. Their participation has level a critical influence on their success. Distance learners' responsibility should not be ignored. Richwood and Goodwin (1999) state that:

Education depends on the effort that students make as well as the leadership and support staff provide. Students are producers as well as consumers of their own learning. Knowledge is no longer delivered as largely fixed, but is transformed and created in the education process. Education is no longer something that happens to you. It is something you do (p. 118).

Hardy and Boaz (1997) note, "What does emerge from comments is a recognition of the complexity of the educational process, in particular for distance education modes of delivery, and the knowledge that responsibility in this enterprise is shared among all participants" (p. 42). During their studying process, learners depend on the delivery mode and location of the distance courses, the distance learners should be more focused on their study, better management of their study time, and the ability to work both independently and as group members. They should be strong self-motivated, self-discipline, and assertive learners

Simonson, et al (2003) illustrate the distance learners' responsibilities from aspects such as attendance and class participation, tone of responses, time for class, equipment requirements, technical know-how, technical difficulties and assignments. They point out that just like the distance instructors should identify their duty to facilitate the learners study, the distance learner also should make clear about their responsibilities to support and improve the potential of their

success in distance learning. In the distance educational teaching and learning process, distance learners should play an active role in order to achieve successful outcomes, they have the full responsibility for their own learning.

## CONCLUSION

As the mainstream in the distance education, adult distance learners should be supported and facilitated in order to achieve their academic success in the process of distance learning. Although many institutions consider distance education a means of expanding their service area, addressing the needs of such a population, especially the adults, it is the faculty's responsibility to make distance courses and programs available in new ways that are both effective and efficient. It requires rethinking the course design, selecting appropriate modes of course delivery, creating strategies to engage adult learners' in active learning, maintaining contact with the students, and analyze the factors, such as the adult learners' characteristics and adult learners' own learning responsibility which influence the adult distance learners' success in the distance education. To help the adult distance learners to achieve success in their distance learning, the distance instructors should truly understand their learners and design an effective learning environment based on the learners' needs to facilitate their learning.

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